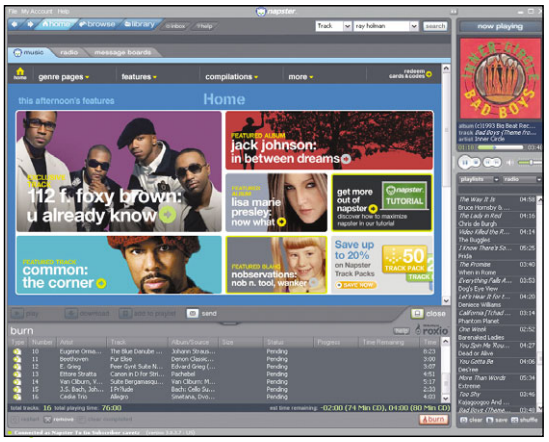
Napster



Napster
$9.95 or $14.95 per month
Napster
www.napster.com

The word Napster was once synonymous with free music downloads. The first iteration of the program was a peer-to-peer client for sharing (um, some would say "stealing") music online. Today, the word Napster means legal music downloads. The company has shed its similarity to other P2P programs that specialize in P2P sharing and now has more in common with the iTunes Music Store.

Unlike the iTunes Music Store, which is aimed at selling songs for 99 cents each, Napster is primarily a subscription service. For a monthly fee, you get unlimited access to the vast Napster music collection.

There are three levels to the Napster service. The basic Napster account ($9.95 per month) lets you listen to music on your PC. A Napster To Go account ($14.95 per month) adds the ability to transfer your Napster music to a handful of compatible portable music players, including models from iRiver and Samsung, the Creative Zen, Dell DJ, the Gateway MP3 Photo Jukebox, and Windows mobile-based phones. Of the popular MP3 players on the market, Napster To Go works with relatively few, and it doesn't work with the iPod. (To see a complete list of compatible players, go to www.napster.com/compatible_devices.)

Both services let you download and listen to unlimited songs, but only as long as you remain a subscriber. If you let your account lapse, those music files become useless. If you don't mind paying a monthly subscription fee for an ethereal music collection, Napster and Napster To Go can be good ways to enjoy an huge, varied mix of songs without committing to buying them. Neither service lets you burn songs to CD, however.

The third level of service, Napster Light, lets you purchase tracks for 99 cents each. Once you've purchased songs, you can burn them to an audio CD and copy them to a larger number of MP3 players that don't support Napster To Go's digital rights management. You can use Napster Light in combination with one of the subscription services or by itself, in which case the service is on par with the iTunes Music Store.

With any level of service, Napster's range of music is enormous and eclectic, with more than 1 million tracks from 65,000 artists available in genres that include everything from classical to pop to Latin. These numbers are comparable to the number of tracks reportedly available at iTunes (although neither service releases exact numbers).

You can search Napster by genre, artist, track name, or album name to find the music you want. I searched for dozens of popular and not-so-popular artists, and most were well-represented. A notable exception was The Beatles, a group that's also missing from the iTunes Music Store.

To hear a certain style of music, perhaps including some artists that you aren't yet familiar with, ready-made compilations are available to let you hear themed tracks, such as 1980s hair bands or old-school funk. For online listing there's a Radio mode, which delivers continuously streaming music in your choice of more than 50 genres. The audio quality was excellent for both offline and streaming downloads.

Napster's interface is somewhat cluttered, but navigation is generally easy and intuitive. Napster requires Windows XP or 2000 and Windows Media Player 7.1 or higher. Napster To Go requires WinXP and WMP 10, plus a compatible portable player.

Whether Napster is right for you will really depend on your choice of portable player and your overall philosophy on paying for music. If you have a compatible player (or you just want to listen at your computer) and want an eclectic, ad-free music stream, a Napster subscription could be a good choice. For music lovers a subscription can be a great way to discover new artists and even entire genres without being limited to 30-second sample clips.

If you are opposed to paying a monthly subscription for music that you can't hear anywhere, anytime, on any media, however, Napster's subscription services will raise your hackles. In this case you're better off with the 99-cent downloads from Napster Light or iTunes Music Store. ▲

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by Kevin Savetz

CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless 2.5 = Absolutely Average 5 = Absolutely Perfect